

The Importance of Block Play

Wooden building blocks are one of the most common of children's toys; in many ways they are also one of the simplest. The blocks usually consist of regular shapes - rectangles, squares, cylinders, triangles - and are often unpainted and natural in color. In some ways all that a child does with wooden blocks is combine and recombine them into different structures or perhaps different groupings. The actions with the blocks may be simple and the materials themselves may be simple but the importance of block play for a child's development is anything but simple.

The most fundamental block set is referred to as unit blocks. Within this set will be a long rectangular block and blocks which are fractions of that long block. The long block, for example, might be seven inches in length. The set will also contain blocks that are 3 and 1/2 inches in length, and 1 and 3/4 inches. A child playing with these blocks, therefore, will be dealing with mathematical fractions long before a teacher introduces the concept in school. When the child is constructing a house for her dolls she will be figuring out how to make the walls the same length by using different sized blocks; she will be learning that sometimes two blocks can take up the same amount of space as one longer block ($1/2 + 1/2 = 1$). This block player is a mathematician.

Block play also requires a child to deal with problems of physics. Building a tower may seem as simple as piling one block on top of another until your tower is, let's say, seven blocks tall. But what happens if the blocks at your disposal are the following: one 4-inch long rectangle, two 1-inch long rectangles, one two-inch long cylinder shaped block, one triangular shaped block, and two cube shaped blocks? Can you stack those blocks in any order? What happens if you try to stack a rectangular block on the apex of the triangular block? What happens if you start with a rectangular block followed by the two cubes and then want the next block to be the cylinder laying on its side? Can you then put a triangle on the cylinder? It turns out that stacking the seven blocks may not be that simple; the child has to take into consideration the shapes of the blocks and the effects of gravity. This block player is also a physicist.

Let's return to the child building the house. Once the walls of the house are up, a roof needs to be put on. But what if the blocks you have left are too short to span the distance between the four walls? How might you modify the structure to incorporate the roof? Do you move the walls in closer or do you build additional columns in the center of the house? It turns out that the child playing with blocks is also an engineer.

Some children use blocks not to build structures but to build stories. Their focus is not on how the blocks fit together to construct bridges, towers and skyscrapers but how the blocks can provide the backdrop and set for the mini-dramas they create with friends. They may build the house but how the walls and roof fit together is not as important as the lives of the family that inhabits the house. Much like the writers of books, these children playing with blocks are the creators of fictional worlds.

In his autobiography, the famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright had this to say about a set of blocks his mother bought for him when he was a young child: "The smooth shapely maple blocks with which to build, the sense of which never afterwards leaves the fingers: so form became feeling." Wright saw a relationship between the block play of his childhood and his work as an architect. Every child who plays with blocks won't grow up to become a famous architect but today's block player may turn out to be tomorrow's mathematician, physicist, engineer or novelist.

T.J. Corcoran, JD, MEd
Founder, The Corcoran School